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Title: The unquiet frontier: the boundaries of philosophy and public theology

Date: 9 April 2014

Originally given at: AHRC Research Network on Philosophy and Religious Practices

Example citation: Graham, E. L. (2014, April 9). *The unquiet frontier: the boundaries of philosophy and public theology*. Unpublished keynote paper given at the AHRC Research Network on Philosophy and Religious Practices at the Riverside Innovation Centre at the University of Chester, 9 April 2014.

Version of item: Given at conference

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/316656>

THE UNQUIET FRONTIER: TRACING THE BOUNDARIES OF PHILOSOPHY AND PUBLIC THEOLOGY

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‘Religion is not a fading and purely private concern. Culture matters, and the ability to tell the stories and shape the symbols which inspire us and frame our lives and priorities is as real and important as ‘harder’ forms of power. There is a growing recognition that beliefs and values are central to both social and personal identities, and that they help us drive both peace and conflict.’ (Woodhead, 2014, p. 2)

INTRODUCTION

In his monumental book, *A Secular Age* (2007), the sociologist Charles Taylor traces the shifting paradigms of religion within modernity, and how to make sense of its novel and unexpected return. He talks at one stage of the ‘Unquiet Frontiers of Modernity’ (Taylor, 2007, pp. 711-727) to describe how it feels to inhabit a world seemingly far removed from religion, which is nevertheless continually shot through with glimpses of what he terms ‘a place of fullness’ (Taylor, 2007, p. 6). As moderns, we have learned to be self-sufficient, to live immanent lives and yet at the periphery of our vision, our lived, quotidian experience, lies a different landscape, in which our horizons of meaning, belonging and identity hint at a transcendent source, beyond immanence, which speaks of ‘some good higher than, beyond human flourishing’ (Taylor, 2007, p. 20).

This image of living at the frontier has remained with me, especially as I have explored the complexities and paradoxes of the so-called ‘post-secular’ condition (Graham, 2013b). The post-secular does feel to me more like a liminal space than a definitive condition or epoch: questioning not only what comes next – after or beyond the secular – but also what it is supposed to have succeeded: what, indeed, was the secular itself all about? So the post-secular roams across one indeterminate frontier of past and present: what was it like before? And how is it now different, and why is that? Where have we been; and where are ‘we’ going?[and who are ‘we’?]

But there are other unsettled, and unsettling boundaries besides the temporal: between secular and religious, most obviously; public and private, insofar as the secular public square has conventionally been configured in particular ways; but when we come to think about the actual debates and diagnoses of this ‘post-secular’ age, we find ourselves at intellectual frontiers: between modern and post-modern, between philosophy and theology; or the relative influence of ideas and social imaginaries in shaping our world versus the study of social movements and religious, cultural practices.

There are many different diagnoses of what constitutes the ‘post-secular’. My own view is rather agonistic, that it constitutes a problematic space between two contradictory trends that are unprecedented, meaning we have little in the way of agreed discourse about the nature of the public square and the legitimacy of religious reasoning within it. We are caught between a rock and a hard place, or between the Scylla of religious resurgence and the Charibdis of

continued secularism and scepticism.¹ How the re-emergence of religious activism and discourse is to be mediated back into a secularized public domain, and the terms on which that is negotiated, has proved to be one of the most problematic dimensions of the whole debate. If we are thinking of the post-secular as a time of the return of religion to public life, what concepts of 'religion' are invoked? Is this religion as belief, or cultural resource; and where are the emerging manifestations of resurgent religion and who are its mediators? Are these essentially functionalist models? And do they bear any relation to the lived realities of religious agents themselves, as demonstrated in their social and political practices?

One solution to this has been to turn to models of faith-based activism as the operationalized 'public theologies' of religious tradition: a pragmatic and contextualized process of mediation, in which the focus is on creating a shared commons of social action. This is attractive; but continues to beg the question of how religious actors resist the pressures of functionalism and instrumentalism. One challenge is to galvanize the actual theological roots of religious involvement, but not as a form of special pleading or proselytization, but as a way of being transparent and accountable for the basis of faith-based social action in a pluralist environment. We need a truly 'public' theology, which not only speaks *about* public issues but is prepared to give an account of itself *in* public; a public theology that can accompany the pragmatic practice – perhaps as Postsecular Rapprochement+ - in which actions *and* words are put to work in constructing a post-secular communicative space.

¹ Scylla (6-headed sea monster) and Charybdis (whirlpool); the rock and the hard place.

THE UNQUIET FRONTIER: THE PARADOX OF POST-SECULAR SOCIETY

As it has emerged in contemporary debate within philosophy, theology and social theory, the post-secular refers in particular to a revisionist understanding of classic secularization theory, understood broadly as both a separation of church and state, the privatization of faith, and the general decreased importance of religion in public life. The conventional account of secularization sees religious decline – even extinction – as an inevitable consequence of modernization. Yet evidence suggests that this is not the case. In many of the most rapidly-developing economies, such as Brazil, China, or India, religion continues to grow and to be a significant part of public life.

A feature of the post-secular condition thus entails a shift in consciousness to allow a certain public recognition of religion, as in for example the interventions of faith-based activism within civil society but also in terms of recognition of religious identity and the legitimacy of religious reasoning in public debate. This is increasingly reflected in the inclusion of ‘religion and belief’ clauses in equality and diversity legislation across Europe (Hill and Whistler, 2013).

On the other hand, especially for those of us in this particular part of northern Europe, there is little reason to feel sanguine about the resilience of religion or its future prospects. Both empirically, in terms of the institutional strength and future viability of mainstream Christian denominations, and philosophically, the enduring presence of critical voices that continue to question the legitimacy of religious actors in the public square, religion continues to be problematic, not least in terms of the very conditions under which it might exercise influence within a pluralist, functionally secular public square.

So whilst religious belief, practice and identity has not been extinguished by modernity and although it has managed to survive (and in many contexts) prosper, we have to stress that this is not a revival of previous forms but their mutation. Furthermore, the space religion/s occupies remains contested and contradictory (agonistic): and it is this third space between the persistence of secular objections to public religion and the new acknowledgement of religious actors that may best be termed the 'post-secular'. Not just post as the successor phase, but as something that troubles and unsettles our prevailing definitions of 'secularity' in the first place, as well as leaving open the many, and often paradoxical, configurations of religion and public life that are now emerging.

One manifestation of the post-secular is a new wave of philosophical thinking which seeks to retrieve religion from the margins of modernity, to reconsider it as a significant and fundamental dimension of dynamics of social cohesion and social change, as well as an inescapable cultural resource for the construction of identity, both public and civic and personal/private. This is exemplified by work by figures such as Jurgen Habermas, Slavoj Zizek, Talal Asad, Charles Taylor, Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti. Such literature heralds a renewed interest in sources of religious and theological reasoning as legitimate 'things to think with': categories such as transcendence, the sacred or holy, not to mention religious traditions as enduring sources of practical wisdom, moral reasoning and cultural hermeneutics.

Tony Blair's recent comment (Blair, 2014) that 'religious extremism' will be a major source of global conflict throughout this century may be a little simplistic (ignoring as it does other

factors such as competition for natural resources, migration, climate change and economic polarization), but it does go to show that faith is not dead, and reflects the global dimensions of this renaissance of religion as political force. Closer to home, a major aspect of the post-secular is of course the return of faith-based organizations to areas of public policy – whether that is the provision of services such as Foodbanks through Christian organizations like the Trussell Trust, or commentary on the part of faith leaders on matters of welfare reform, international relations or political debate. Both of these should remind us that even in relatively secular Western societies, religious bodies have always occupied significant spaces within the voluntary and community sector as well as in the structures of the State and public opinion.

However, this renewed visibility takes place against two major counter-trends:

- i. Continued prominence of secular humanist and atheist interventions against the legitimacy of religion as public reason or political force, exemplified by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Polly Toynbee, Sam Harris and others.

A recent online opinion piece <http://www.onreligion.co.uk/new-new-atheism/> - suggests a greater degree of accommodation amongst atheists and secular humanists towards those of faith, so clearly there is diversity here. But as we'll see in a minute, scepticism towards the creeds and institutions of traditional religion is strong and growing.

- ii. Organizational decline: YouGov, Woodhead stats.

In England and Wales, the 2011 Census notes a significant rise in those recording 'no religion'; whilst those identifying as 'Christian' holds up at around 59%, this is down from a figure of over 70% in 2001. There is bad news for traditional, mainstream institutions.

Research by YouGov published in 2013 for the Westminster Faith Debates reveals that only 17% of those identifying as Church of England actually attend church regularly. And the age profile is also startling: nearly half of people over 60 say they are Anglican; but this applies to only one in ten of those in their twenties. Christian identity is failing to be transmitted from one generation to another, and of course this carries very obvious implications for the long-term sustainability of religious faith.

But it's not straightforward. According to YouGov, nearly half of those polled under 30 say they have no religion; but less than half of them identify as 'atheists'. The predominant self-identification is possibly 'Spiritual but not Religious' (Fuller, 2001). Only half the population say they have had direct contact with a church in the past year, suggesting that their knowledge of what the institution does and stands for, as well as what it is like to attend worship or be a church member, is fairly tenuous. It may be communicated in the main through news or entertainment media – in fact, the YouGov survey suggested that a similar proportion (8%) had had contact with a member of the clergy in the past 12 months as had encountered religion through TV or newspapers (Woodhead, 2014, p. 64). This of course gives those latter institutions an increasingly influential role as facilitators of religious literacy. It is organized, creedal religion that is rejected; and perhaps the most serious finding of YouGov's recent research, and one which has direct bearing on my concerns, is the conclusion that religion is viewed increasingly not as something innocuous or marginal, but, in Linda Woodhead's words, as 'a toxic brand'.

These attitudes were also highlighted in research carried out in November 2012, for ComRes, on behalf of ITV News in an online survey of 2,055 Britons aged 18 and over. 79 per cent

agreed with the statement that religion is a cause of much misery and conflict in the world today, although 11 per cent disagreed. 35 per cent agreed that religion is a force for good in the world, but 45 per cent disagreed, dissentients being more numerous among men (50 per cent) than women (41 per cent). As the report commented,

‘All in all, these data point to a society in which religion is increasingly in retreat and nominal. With the principal exception of the older age groups, many of those who claim some religious allegiance fail to underpin it by a belief in God or to translate it into regular prayer or attendance at a place of worship. People in general are more inclined to see the negative than the positive aspects of religion, and they certainly want to keep it well out of the political arena.’ (ComRes 2012)

It seems to me that we have a perfect storm: institutions that inherited a particular way of relating to public life are fragile; sceptics and critics of religion continue to question its very legitimacy as a respectable intellectual option let alone a legitimate force in society; and yet, religion continues to be a significant source of social capital, makes up the strongest single stake-holder in the voluntary sector, is a remarkably potent mobilising force for volunteers; and globally, if not the ‘cause’ of political and cultural change, cannot be disentangled from issues of identity, popular movements, nation-building, geo-political conflict or humanitarian initiatives.

In his new book, *Culture and the Death of God* (2014), Terry Eagleton puts it this way:

‘No sooner had a thoroughly atheistic culture arrived on the scene ... than the deity himself was suddenly back on the agenda with a vengeance ... The world is ... divided between those who believe too much and those who believe too little’ (Eagleton, 2014, pp. 197-8).

That, and John Caputo’s much quoted aphorism - that God is dead, but so also is the death of God – capture for me this far more agonistic model of the post-secular, in which what we are looking at is not the revival of religion, or the reversion of secular modernity into a re-encharmed body politic, but something more unprecedented and complex.

PHILOSOPHERS ON RELIGION AND THE POST-SECULAR

Before we go any further, I should perhaps offer a disclaimer. If there is even such a concept as the ‘post-secular’, we need to appreciate that secularization and the secular are in themselves already complex and diverse terms. They should not be regarded as fixed shibboleths, but as heuristic and conceptual frameworks that may now be in need of reconstruction. The secular has a ‘genealogy’, therefore, as Talal Asad puts it (Asad, 2003, p. 192): marked by the emergence of spheres such as the market, the state and the person that are not governed by belief in divine agency but in human autonomy, reason and technical regulation. The ‘social imaginary’ (Calhoun, 2010, p. 36) governing such activities as business, industry, medicine and government were gradually conceived according to this- and not other-worldly criteria.

Similarly, if the secular has a history, it is gendered. If part of its critical and revisionist force is to question whether the taxonomy of modernity into secular/religious, public/private, reason/faith, then gender dualism is deeply implicated in that process of categorization. I've discussed this in more detail elsewhere, but we need always to be aware of how the emergence of the post-secular exposes how configurations of public life, religion and subjectivity are inscribed on the bodies of women. So, conventional secular theories of citizenship struggle to locate the veiled Muslim woman, since her expressions of religious observance do not compute with the values of a neutral public square, nor with a narrative of Enlightenment feminism that regards traditional religions as inhibiting of women's agency. Yet at the same time, one of the ways in which religiously orthodox groups articulate a distinctive identity in relation to liberal democratic discourse is to promulgate highly conservative views on matters such as abortion, same-sex relationships, gender stereotyping and women's rights. 'What's missing' about the post-secular is, in part, the gendered nature of modernity and the types of secularism that accompanied it; and the way in which the return of religion also positions women differently within the public sphere. (Graham, *What's Missing? Gender, Reason and the Post-Secular*, 2013a)

It's feasible, then, that the 'post' of the post-secular should be read, as I have said elsewhere, 'as an interrogative marker, a critical cue, for questions concerning the authors, objects and political implications of appeals to [modernity, the secular] and "humanism" ... and to expose the 'categorical instability' of such terms (Graham 2002, pp. 36–7; Badmington 2004). With the post-secular, therefore, it is still debatable whether secularization has experienced a reversal, or religion a revival, when the very categories of 'religious' and

‘secular’ are themselves contested. Nevertheless, if ‘secular’, ‘modern’, ‘the public’ and ‘religion’ are constructs, even that dawning realization requires us to rethink their oscillating relationship and the implications of that for the conduct of public debate, civil society and political action.

WHAT’S MISSING? JÜRGEN HABERMAS

Still one of the world’s top 100 thinkers according to *Prospect* Magazine’s 2014 poll, Jürgen Habermas has emerged in his latter years as one of the chief proponents of what a post-secular age might mean for our assumptions about the nature of public reason and the conduct of secular, liberal democracy. He would in his earlier years probably have allied himself with a broadly liberal position which required the separation of religion from the state and the creation of a non-confessional public space in order to ensure the most equitable conditions for the articulation of a rich and non-partisan discourse of citizenship and participatory democracy.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, he has been more prepared to consider the introduction of religious sources of reasoning into a renewed vocabulary of civic virtue. Whilst many secular philosophers have tended to focus on the divisive and regressive influence of religion on society, Habermas is more prepared to identify its potential as a powerfully cohesive and beneficial source of moral and political reasoning, helping to correct some of the deficiencies of modernity (Dillon, 2010, pp. 143-144). He has alluded to a kind of melancholy in late modernity, a sense of lack within secular reason – as he says, ‘an awareness of what is missing’ (2010), namely any sort of metaphysical or transcendental

grounding of its commitment to things such as justice, progress and well-being. Western society has become ‘hollowed-out’ of collective values. Habermas’ disquiet is prompted in part by a response to the global financial crisis of 2007-8, which he felt exposed the lack of any values of public accountability on the part of the global economy; and concerns about the impact of advanced biotechnologies on our understandings of human integrity and dignity.

Post-enlightened, post-metaphysical reason has ‘lost its grip’ on ‘the moral whole’, on any robust and globally-applicable vision of human dignity – what Habermas terms ‘the Kingdom of God on earth ... as collectively binding’. (Habermas, 2010, p. 19) It deprives and impoverishes secular, materialist citizens of the means to realize ‘an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven’ (2010, p. 19).

If the post-secular constituted solely a kind of revisionism towards the relationship between modernity and religion, it would hardly be controversial, since the prevailing sociological consensus is now that, empirically and theoretically, the secularization thesis only really ever applied to Europe. The complication rests in Habermas’ claim that religion should now be considered to have legitimacy in public discourse alongside that of reason. Secular citizens can no longer bracket out the claims of religion, but must engage with the potential semantic and cognitive content of faith. Despite the potential for religious or theological principles to nurture and inform public debate, however, Habermas argues that religiously motivated actors must nevertheless ‘translate’ their convictions into universally accessible language appropriate for the neutrality that is liberal democracy. He speaks of a process of ‘translation’ by which explicitly metaphysical precepts might be introduced into public debate.

‘The truth contents of religious contributions can enter into the institutionalized practice of deliberation and decision-making only when the necessary translation already occurs in the pre-parliamentarian domain, i.e. in the political public sphere itself ... citizens of faith may make public contributions in their own religious language only subject to the translation proviso.’ (Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, 2008, pp. 131-132)

But does this actually constitute a *post*-secular context in any meaningful fashion, if the predominant discourse of the public square remains essentially unchanged whilst appearing to broaden its terms of reference to embrace a deeper pluralism of values? This fails to satisfy either party, however. On the one hand, for secularists, it represents a betrayal of the neutrality of the rational public square, a surrender to special pleading. On the other, religionists find themselves wondering what is *post*-secular about Habermas’ prescription, since the onus still appears to rest upon them to take responsibility for mediating the particularities of their tradition into something more publicly-accessible. It does nothing to shake the foundations of secular hegemony, insofar as the logic of reason still trumps all others. Even if there is a consensus that, pragmatically speaking, it is necessary to reach a degree of accommodation with faith-based perspectives, the actual procedural protocols of this require further elucidation; and this is something to which I will return later.

CHARLES TAYLOR: THE SECULAR RUBICON

As we've seen, then, to speak of the post-secular, is to speak of the 'growing resurgence of faith and spirituality in the urban and public realm' (Beaumont and Baker, 2011, p. 5). Yet even though religion may be newly prominent, I am convinced that the language of revival or even of 'desecularization' as Peter Berger would have it, is to be avoided at all costs. Whatever is happening cannot be set up as a simple return to what came before modernity. Charles Taylor's anatomy of the 'Secular Age' articulates this well. The secular age has fatally deprived people of a transcendent understanding of self, history and society. The 'porous' self is one whose everyday experience is ordered by the sacred, of being subject to divine and natural forces beyond oneself; the buffered self lives in a new existential and phenomenological world, in which the cosmos is disenchanted and the individual is free to chart their own course through life. There is no longer a transcendent source by which our moral lives are grounded and directed. It is more to do, simply, with a reorientation of the social imaginary away from transcendence towards immanence. There can be no reversion to the 'unbuffered self': even the most religiously-observant and orthodox amongst us must live to some degree with the realisation that the conditions of belief have radically shifted, in Taylor's words, 'from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.' (Taylor, 2007, p. 3)

Even the process whereby the world appears to be becoming re-enchanted does not alter this. We are not going to return to premodern, presecular ways of life. It is this realisation that is, for me, another decisive hallmark of this era as the *post*-secular, and actually accentuates the

unprecedented nature of this condition, and the challenges to the conduct of public debate. How *are* religious actors to be incorporated into a Western cultural imaginary in which ‘the general equilibrium point is firmly within immanence, where many people have trouble understanding how a sane person could believe in God’? (Taylor, 2007, p. 770) Regardless of our own personal faith commitment, we have all crossed a Rubicon, we might say, into a realm in which personal autonomy, reflexivity and freedom of belief are axiomatic. We cannot disinvent secularism; we cannot *not* be aware that there are many paths of belief and unbelief, notwithstanding the persistence of religion and its bold return to the public stage.

TERRY EAGLETON: WERE WE EVER SECULAR?

The cultural theorist and philosopher Terry Eagleton has emerged as a strong critic of New Atheism. A recurrent theme has been the failure of post-Enlightenment thought to expunge itself of its metaphysical foundations. One of the illusions of modernity is its failure to see that the recession of religion from day-to-day consciousness conceals its extended after-life in forms of apparently secular philosophies. In *Culture and the Death of God* (Eagleton, 2014), he argues that in the secular, modern era, a series of intellectual movements or watchwords – Reason, progress, the State, empiricism and Nature – have sought to number of other phenomena have occupied the position of God’s surrogates:

‘The history of the modern age is among other things the search for a viceroy for God. Reason, Nature, *Geist*, culture, art, the sublime, the nation, the state, science, humanity, Being, Society, the Other, desire, the life force and personal relations: all of these have acted from time to time as forms of displaced divinity.’ (Eagleton, 2014, p. 44)

The contemporary re-appearance of global religion now confounds the secularist consensus. Eagleton's thesis, however, is that we have never been secular: the Enlightenment was really an attack on the coupling of ecclesiastical authority and political sovereignty, particularly of the autocratic or oligarchical kind. It was thus not avowedly atheist, but sought more to root its social and political values in forms of natural religion. A universalist humanism replaced Christian revelation, but betrays a deep continuity, not least in the way that organized religion served to inculcate civic virtue and obedience in the populace, thus ensuring that reforms would empower the bourgeoisie without spreading to the masses: 'religion is judged primarily in terms of its utility. It is acceptable only if it promotes the kind of morality one would still endorse without it.' (Eagleton, 2014, p. 25) It was not in the interests of Enlightenment thinkers to abandon completely the comforts and political expediencies of religion. However, as the 21st dawned,

'At the very moment when contemporary capitalism seemed to be moving into a post-theological, post-metaphysical, post-ideological, even post-historical era, a wrathful God has once more raised his head, eager to protest that his obituary notice has been prematurely posted.' (Eagleton, 2014, p. 199)

In fact, the history of modernity itself should be seen as an extended 'rewriting of religious faith in secular terms' (Eagleton, 2014, p. 47). It is the very artifice of any such ultimate values that is their ultimate undoing. Secular myths of nationhood, progress, the self or the

revolution cannot 'be legislated into existence by philosophical fiat' (p. 61); these ideals never succeed in being more than 'ersatz forms of religion' (p. 80).

Eagleton isn't unique in identifying the Western Enlightenment as a protest against religious autocracy rather than an atheist project. But he does attempt to demonstrate how this tendency persisted throughout modern philosophical thought to this day. Throughout his survey of post-Enlightenment thought, then, Eagleton exposes all alternatives to religion as pale imitations, since any secular or humanist appeals to absolute authority collapse, ultimately, under their own weight of self-referentialism. They lose any moral leverage by being devoid of value in the first place. 'As the rationalising process comes to infiltrate the cultural and religious spheres, as with the mechanistic world of Deism or the legalistic nature of some Protestant doctrine, these realms become less hospitable to questions of fundamental value, and thus less capable of underpinning political power.' (Eagleton, 2014, p. 43) Any attempt to invest society, human knowledge or morality with a sense of meaning fails because none of these surrogates is capable of transcending the conditions of their own generation. Audaciously channelling Nietzsche, Freud and Alfred Hitchcock (as only he would dare to do), Eagleton renounces the hubris of secular modernity in these terms:

'God is indeed dead and it is we who are his assassins, yet our true crime is less deicide than hypocrisy. Having murdered the Creator in the most spectacular of all Oedipal revolts, we have hidden the body, repressed all memory of the traumatic event, tidied up the scene of the crime and, like Norman Bates in *Psycho*, behave as though we are innocent of the act. We have also dissembled our deicide with various shamefaced forms of pseudo-religion, as though in expiation of our unconscious guilt. Modern secular societies, in other words, have

effectively disposed of God but find it morally and politically convenient – even imperative – to behave as though they have not.’ (Eagleton, 2014, p. 157)

Back in less expansive mood, Eagleton’s analysis touches on a further important issue for us, and it is the question of what kind of ‘religion’ his fellow philosophers invoke when wishing to address this post-secular sense of nostalgia and loss; and also, what kind of ‘religion’ may indeed endure. Not surprisingly, perhaps, his argument is that philosophers today are merely perpetuating a long-standing tendency on the part of post-Enlightenment thinkers who wish to defend Western values or rejuvenate the moral imagination: a turn to religion, but in functionalist terms. Whilst eschewing matters of belief for themselves, they express a longing for religion that will be morally uplifting and socially pacifying for the masses. It is thoroughly in keeping with constructs of religion within liberal democratic traditions as essentially subjective, interior and private. This sentiment reached its epitome at the beginning of the twentieth century with William James’ definition of religion as ‘the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [sic] in their solitude.’ (2003 edn, p. 29)

The price paid by this settlement, however, is to surrender the public, political impact of religious experience. Forms of religious establishment or civil religion may endure, but they inhabit a political and cultural settlement of personal choice and nationalist ceremony, and the specious division of the world into the temporal and the spiritual. In the temporal realm, God rules by virtue of law through secular authorities, whereas in spiritual domain is governed by faith and grace effected by Christ’s death and resurrection. Hence the ease with which the public, secular realm can be evacuated of the transcendent and the sacred; whilst religious sentiment, discourse and practice becomes the select enclave of the minority,

struggling increasingly to make itself heard and understood on its own terms. And possibly the way in which ‘Generation SBNR’ separates the ‘spiritual’ from the ‘religious’: one subjective, chosen, self-made, wholesome; the other, hidebound, institutionalised, autocratic.

True to his Christian Marxist roots, however, Eagleton insists on something much more radical and iconoclastic – and, well *political*:

‘If religious faith were to be released from the burden of furnishing social orders with a set of rationales for their existence, it might be free to rediscover its true purpose as a critique of all such politics. In this sense, its superfluity might prove its salvation. The New Testament has little or nothing to say of responsible citizenship. It is not a ‘civilised’ document at all. It shows no enthusiasm for social consensus. Since it holds that such values are imminently to pass away, it is not greatly taken with standards of civic excellence or codes of good conduct. What it adds to common-or-garden morality is not some supernatural support, but the grossly inconvenient news that our forms of life must undergo radical dissolution if they are to be reborn as just and compassionate communities. The sign of that dissolution is a solidarity with the poor and powerless. It is here that a new configuration of faith, culture and politics might be born.’ (Eagleton, 2014, pp. 207-8)

It is the very transcendence of God which serves as an irreducible critique of the givenness of any social order or temporal authority. ‘It is theological orthodoxy to hold that the sovereignty of God is not that of a despot, however benevolent, but a power which allows the world to be itself.’ (Eagleton, 2014, p. 143) Fidelity to divine power overcomes loyalty to

earthly authority, since it suggests a solidarity with the powerless and marginalized, in the name of a vision of human community which disrupts conventional ties of family, household or nationality – all of which actually makes ‘religion’ a highly unreliable basis for social cohesion.

Crucially, Eagleton appeals here to religion as lived experience, as a practice of faith, rather than metaphysical or moral resource. What analysts often miss, he argues, is this very *popular* nature of religion: its ‘capacity ... to unite theory and practice, elite and populace, spirit and senses’ (2014, p. ix). ‘No symbolic form in history has matched religion’s ability to link the most exalted of truths to the daily existence of countless men and women.’ (Eagleton, 2014, p. 122) What is significant for Eagleton is not so much what and how people believe, or even the spiritual substance of religion, as its quotidian, everyday influence on lives and cultures – including, crucially, its institutional, structural forms of mediation. Its very privatisation or mutation into some kind of spiritual balm is highly problematic, because this renders it nothing more than the ‘opium of the masses’. Rather, the enduring after-life of religion as public reality is one thing that can resist attempts to reduce it to subjective feeling or personal morality and which constitutes its very resilience to forces of appropriation. Yet of course, in the face of the demographic and statistical slump recorded by organized religion in the West to which I alluded earlier, we have the potential undoing of this. Whether it is as a source of social cohesion or dissent, it is looking increasingly unlikely that public, institutional expressions of religion will be able to fulfil these expectations.

THE POST-SECULAR PUBLIC SQUARE

So, I've been tracing this frontier between philosophical understandings of the post-secular and how religion, religious communities and religious practices might be configured within that. A number of questions emerge for me:

1. In the light of Habermas' call for the inclusion of religious voices in a pluralist public square, I know I am not alone nevertheless in wondering how, procedurally and substantively that might proceed.

If religious actors are to mediate their values how does that work?

What kind of communicative space does this require?

2. From Eagleton's bracing critique of the dangers of a creeping functionalism in much of the invocation of a religious sensibility to the post-secular, comes – again, hardly a new problem – the question of how one conceptualizes 'religion' as something which is often 'black-boxed' (Sandal, 2012, p. 67) - decontextualized and reified, rather than identified as the property of specific faith traditions and operationalized in specific practices, both secular or civic and religious.
3. Thirdly, perhaps from the more empirical end of things, but self-evident in the theoretical coupling within the post-secular of currents of resurgence and decline, comes a warning that Adam hinted at yesterday – the expectation that religious bodies such as the mainstream churches will be able to resume a leading role in the provision of welfare and the renewal of local civil society, when the reality is that institutionally they are ageing and dwindling. So matters of sheer long-term sustainability: the churches may be fantastic

repositories of religious and spiritual social capital, they may constitute the moral heart of a regenerated political economy, but simple demography surely militates against that being the case for many more generations.

It seems to me this is another twist of the post-secular knife, really, in that part of the paradoxical state is the persistence of personal, unaffiliated, non-doctrinal ‘spirituality’ alongside the waning of formal, statistical membership. If those who are Spiritual but Not Religious don’t fill the pews, does that mean they have the critical mass to mobilise volunteers to the foodbanks, to the trade justice lobbies and the neighbourhood organizations? Because organizations like churches do.

So we have questions also about the institutional, public sustainability of faith – whether that is in terms of operational social capital or indeed the existence of sustainable ‘chains of memory’ by which a tradition will actually be handed on from one generation to the next.

These represent three challenges to thinking about the future of post-secular public space in which religious actors assume greater prominence. I want to think a little more about this before I finish, although I suspect I will leave some elements of this unresolved.

POST-SECULAR RAPPROCHEMENT

Let me begin with the question about whether ‘religion’ within the post-secular debate is too abstract and reified a phenomenon. One way of resolving this has been, effectively, to take a turn to practice. So for example the strategy of ‘post-secular rapprochement’ as commended by urban geographers such as Justin Beaumont and Paul Cloke, in collaboration with urban theologians such as Chris Baker. It represents attention to the way in which various types of religiously-motivated activism converge with other faith-based organizations or even secular agencies to form broad-based strategic alliances around initiatives of neighbourhood renewal, community organizing or charitable service (Cloke, 2011).

For Cloke and Beaumont, these represent ‘postsecular repositionings of both discourse *and* praxis’ (x2) (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013, p. 31, my emphasis), since such interventions expressly demonstrate a new visibility of religious practice in the public realm – partly in response to neoliberal cuts in public expenditure and resurgence of third sector organizations – without any attempt to deny the evident pluralism of urban politics and civil society. What matters is the localism and particularity of such initiatives, as practised in new ‘spaces of ethical identity ... in which citizens are able to journey from the unshakeable certainties of particular world-views, with their extant comfort zones, to the unknown real and imagined spaces of rapprochement’ (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013, p. 32-33).

Common purpose creates sufficient condition for groups of many diverse convictions to suspend their differences in the interests of pragmatic and strategic engagement towards shared goals. As a result, what each encounters in the other is the practical wisdom of belief

systems as mediated in purposeful action. Some alliances may remain quite instrumental or temporary, but other projects may lead to longer-term collaborations and start to effect genuine dialogue between world-views. Similarly, not all expressions of faith will see rapprochement as a key objective; but the opening up of faith as praxis rather than faith as dogma offers concrete and specific territory within which further talk about specific values, aims and ends in relation to shared space can take place.

To a theologian, such a model of shared practices as common ground reflects recent shifts in the study of Christian theology, such as the recasting over the last 20-30 years of the discipline of practical theology away from the ‘applied’ tasks of ministry and pastoral care, towards a thoroughly performative discipline in which ‘practice’ is the primary discourse, and theology as doctrine and religion and belief function as ‘action-guiding world-views’ but precisely to facilitate the practices of discipleship.

It is also familiar, of course, in the light of various kinds of Liberation Theology to have emerged from the two-thirds world in the last quarter of the twentieth century, in which the Gospel is understood as embodied in forms of transformative and emancipatory praxis. The goal of theology is to facilitate orthopraxy or right *action*, which become the marks of authenticity rather than adherence to cognitive or propositional criteria of belief. This kind of enacted faith in action has been characterised by Justin Tse, another urban geographer, as ‘*grounded theologies*, performative practices of place-making informed by understandings of the transcendent.’ (Tse, 2014, p. 202)

We might wish to explore how such grounded theologies ‘take place’ in relation to human and physical environments as they help to shape particular cultural and social practices, including alliances with others. It helps us to see how spatially-embodied subjectivities are theologically constituted; but also how they occur within the ecology of specific places, points of time or specific sets of issues or concerns.

But you may have noted how earlier I stressed Cloke and Beaumont’s phrase, ‘postsecular repositionings of both discourse *and* praxis’. They characterize faith-based organizations as ‘communities of interpretation’ as well as vehicles of ‘service and care’ (2013, p. 36). It seems to me if we have a turn to practice, without reverting to any kind of applied theology, it is important for a number of reasons to insist that mere pragmatism – in the sense of settling for the most expedient or achievable goal – is not enough. We need a stronger pragmatism, in which strategic goals are expressive of values which transcend the immediacy of any given situation but are nevertheless tangible and realizable in the here and now. But that doesn’t seem to me to preclude a further stage of rapprochement – Rapprochement+ perhaps – where those deeper value-commitments and *truth-claims* actually become a matter of public exchange.

It’s interesting for me to read, as a theologian, an essay by Nukhet Sandal, in the context of international relations, where he says a similar thing. ‘Religion’ needs to be factored into public discourse, but it is too generic, essentialist even, to capture the nuanced and diverse ways in which people’s ‘beliefs’ and ‘practices’ interact. He proposes the term ‘public theology’, to denote the systematic way in which people’s deepest convictions about the sacred, the divine or the transcendent are mediated into public action; how values are

negotiated, practised and operationalised. What is commonly termed 'religion' in public policy is actually, for Sandal, 'the sum of clashing or converging public theologies' (Sandal, 2012, p. 68).

Now, 'public theology' emerges really from a specifically Christian tradition and is of fairly recent provenance, but certainly within that more focused field, it is the discipline concerned with the engagement of Christian traditions and teachings with the public contexts of economics, government, civil society, religious life and institutions themselves and other public institutions such as education, the media and welfare. But it is quite definitely the discipline that seeks to relate theological sources and norms to policies and practices. Furthermore, it would locate itself within a broadly Habermasian sensibility, insofar as it regards itself not only as being theology about the public realm, but necessarily accountable and comprehensible to non-theological perspectives.

As Christendom passes away, public theology realizes the need to come to terms with the waning of its privilege, and the fact that its basic premises will not be immediately comprehensible to non-theological publics. Nevertheless, as one of its leading practitioners, Max Stackhouse argues, the 'really existing dynamics of globalization cannot be grasped or guided without studying the relationship of faith to culture, culture to societies, and societies to the formation of a new public ... We need a theology wide and deep enough to interpret and guide this new public' (Stackhouse 2007a, p. 33). Public theology offers then, to act as facilitator of conversations about the values that inform the (pluralist) public square.

This kind of public theology does not set out to defending the interests of specific faith-communities, but aims to generate informed understandings of the theological and religious dimensions of public issues. A priority has to be that it is accessible and comprehensible to those beyond the community of faith, and unfamiliar with theology, in the interests of public accountability and the integrity of the public realm itself. All authentic theology has to be also a public discourse; 'if theology is to be trusted to participate in public discourse it ought to be able to make a plausible case for what it advocates in terms that can be comprehended by those who are not believers' (Tracy, 1981, p. 112).

Public theology often refers to itself as 'bilingual', simultaneously rooted in 'religiously informed discourse that intends to be intelligible and convincing to adherents within its own religious tradition while at the same time being comprehensible and possibly persuasive to those outside it' (Breitenberg 2003, pp. 65–6).

Now this is controversial, and has been attacked by post-liberal critics who regard this biligualism as a form of capitulation to secular reason. But in response, public theologians have appealed to traditions of natural law and common reason, all grounded in an understanding of divine revelation as proceeding not only through the dogmas of the Church but in the creative, world-building and meaning-making activities of all humanity.

There's another reason why the post-secular public square should not be afraid to 'bracket in' theological, philosophical and metaphysical discourse and to draw from the well-springs of its own wisdom. Terry Eagleton alluded to it: the need to have sources of radical vision in our

public life that are not simply exhausted or contained by the narrowly pragmatic. Similarly, in his book, *Faith and Social Capital after the Debt Crisis* (2012), Adam Dinham argues that faith-based bodies risk being fatally co-opted into functionalist or instrumentalized relations if the only values or motivations they can articulate are immanent and pragmatic. Like Eagleton, he is concerned to keep alive the dimensions of faith-based social capital that is not exhausted by the short-term imperatives of strategic, broad-based alliances, if that means they lose any consciousness of their distinctiveness or fail to draw deeper values from the well-springs of faith. As he says, ‘It is time to advance faith-based reasons in faith-based terms.’ (Dinham, 2012)

Dinham makes the case for the value of a public theological language that is not in thrall to managerialism or the instrumental tendencies of social capital, but which is capable of articulating ‘alternative public discourses which broaden [and deepen?] the canvas of concerns and the vocabulary of the social. A language additional or alternative to free-market capitalism ... is incredibly helpful in the revalorizing of neglected human categories.’ (Dinham, 2012) Far from an intrusive intervention into public discourse, such faith-based discourse that speaks ‘in its own words’ may actually enrich and broaden such communication.

But of course that depends on the people of faith themselves being confident and articulate in the precepts of their own traditions – but often I think ordinary members of faith-communities lack religious literacy about their own roots as well as those of others. In other work I’ve done, I call for public theology to reinvent itself as a new kind of ‘Christian apologetics’ – to rescue this term from its modernist appropriation as argument over

propositional doctrine with a view to convert, but as a properly public discourse that calls Christians back to an early Biblical mandate, as expressed in the first letter of Peter:

‘Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.’ (1 Peter 3:15, NSV).

This returns us to the relationship between words and actions in post-secular rapprochement. Actions may speak louder than words, but the nature of the post-secular condition suggests that whilst the practices of faithful citizenship constitute a kind of first-order public theology, they may still need justification. ‘Giving an account of oneself’ may be expressed in the praxis of care, social activism and active citizenship; but it must also mean being able to speak with conviction into a reasoned public debate.

The corollary of such postsecular rapprochement, and thus how it might address the third, Habermasian problem, is that public theology is strongly committed to a shared realm of communicative reason and the collaborative task of forging a cohesive civil society. There must be genuine mutual accountability, not as subservience to the lowest common denominator, but because the task of building a shared space of common purpose requires it. Indeed, one of the ways in which public theology might promote the welfare of the city is to contribute towards a civil, inclusive space of public debate and action in which everyone is welcome to cultivate the skills of active citizenship.

This has something to do with the formation of civic virtue:

‘The purpose of a pragmatic public theology ... is not to galvanize a singular metaphysical moral vision or to reinforce a singular normative world-view, but to facilitate and to nourish collaborative solidarities around common moral tasks.’ (Hogue, 2010, p. 366)

So this seems particularly ‘unquiet’ territory, in the sense of being very volatile, in terms of people’s shifting allegiances or indeed the erosion of significant moorings to institutional or creedal forms of faith. Neither institutional churches nor ‘cultured despisers’ and critics of religion are really prepared for the situation that presents itself to us in the UK and possibly other parts of Northern Europe, which is this undeniable shrinkage of religious institutions and the drift away from affiliation, alongside resurgence of religion as a global and local political and cultural force. The religious landscape is diverse and complex. People don’t identify with leadership and authorities; scepticism is strong, but heterodox kinds of belief may be stronger. But this very ambivalence of institutional, organized religion presents further problems when it comes to a consideration of how it might be manifested in public, or what groups and organizations might serve as the prime mediators and representatives of faith into the public realm.

The re-emergence of religion in public, in areas such as politics, urbanization, social policy and law, may well turn out to be the defining characteristic of our generation. The question is, whether our conceptual frameworks are fit for purpose, and whether discourse of the ‘post-secular’ possesses sufficient clarity and explanatory weight to meet the challenge. For some, public suspicion has been heightened by perceptions of religion as ‘extremist’ and

antipathetic to liberal democracy; for others, it represents renewed opportunities to speak into a less monolithic public sphere or replenish itself with theological preconditions for the practices of citizenship in a world no longer bifurcated by the logic of ‘private belief’ and ‘public service’.

Maybe the time has come to think about a ‘public theology’ that engages with pluralism not by assuming a lowest common denominator but by starting from its own traditions and starting-points, the better to speak across the post-secular divide. But in the spirit of rapprochement, it would locate itself within fluid boundaries and identities and concentrates on building common spaces and projects as a means of facilitating dialogue. It would seek collaboration and solidarity as its core objectives: the achievement of shared goals and values, even amidst pluralism, is preferable to disinterested debate. Thus it takes seriously Charles Taylor’s characterization of modern consciousness as framed by reflexivity in the face of pluralism; but works actively and constructively within such a context as a site not only of religious exchange but of a shared purpose to rejuvenate the theory and practice of common citizenship.

April 9th, 2014

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